



JOSHUA LIM/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Brett Morian of Daytona Beach, right, hugs an attendee during the candlelight vigil at Ember on Sunday night.

OUR COMMUNITY WILL HEAL

Words cannot adequately convey the depth of the horror, outrage and grief in Central Florida in the wake of what now ranks as the worst mass shooting in American history.

Orlando now tragically sits atop a list of infamy, sharing the sorrow of Virginia Tech; Newtown, Conn.; and Aurora, Colo.

We will not — we must not — let Sunday's heinous act of brutality and cowardice define our community.

As terror has struck other cities around the world in recent months — Paris, Brussels, San Bernardino — our shock and anger have been mixed with a growing sense of unease. Orlando, as one of the world's most popular and iconic destinations for travelers, and a community that proudly cherishes its diversity, has long been considered a high-value target for would-be terrorists.

Now it appears our worst fears have been realized.

Investigators on Sunday were sorting out the details of the massacre following the carnage in the early-morning hours at Pulse Orlando, a gay-themed nightclub. They were studying what could possibly have motivated the shooter, identified by police as 29-year-old Omar Mir Seddique Mateen of Port St. Lucie, the U.S. born son of Afghan parents. He reportedly declared his allegiance to the Islamic State, and U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson of Florida said ISIS had claimed responsibility for the massacre. But Mateen's father insisted his son was motivated by hatred of homosexuals.

Whatever conclusions investigators might reach, the loss of at least 50 souls, and the wounding of dozens more innocents, is an unbearable blow for any community. We join with the families, friends and neighbors of victims in mourning them. An outpouring of love and support from Central Florida is the bare minimum due them.

Beyond offering our abundant prayers and sympathy, we must ensure that those who survive — who will forever carry the scars from the trauma — know that they are not alone today, tomorrow or in the months and years to come.

Let our community define itself by our unequivocal response: United.

How we come together to remember and honor the dead, and comfort their families and friends.

How we help heal the victims wounded in body and spirit.

How we work with our leaders and our neighbors to close gaps in security and make Central Florida safer.

How we stand in defiance of anyone who would provoke fear and division in our community.

How we proudly reaffirm Orlando's identity as a welcoming, inclusive place for people who live here or visit, no matter their background or orientation.

We will unite, in an affirming bond that is more mighty, and enduring, than the twisted thoughts of a young man who allegedly unleashed this atrocity.

It's inevitable, and healthy, that the lead-up and immediate reaction to the shooting will be scrutinized for any shortcomings. But local, state and federal leaders deserve credit for responding in cooperation and solidarity. Gov. Rick Scott quickly declared a state of emergency to remove any barriers to federal and state assistance.

And lest we forget, there are heroes. They are the people who stepped up as community treasures in the midst of tragedy.

The police who converged on an active crime scene in the middle of the night to confront the shooter.

The trauma teams at area hospitals who responded to the overwhelming crush of gravely wounded victims.

The crowds of caring people who stood patiently in lines snaking from area blood-donation centers.

The neighbors who spontaneously provided food and drinks to the first responders on the scene.

Let us sustain and build on these efforts.

Central Florida is tested as never before. Our heartfelt response will grow stronger every day.

#OrlandoUnited

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